

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Newport, R.I.

THE OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP OF GENERAL H. NORMAN
SCHWARZKOPF DURING OPERATIONS DESERT SHIELD
AND DESERT STORM

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College
in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the
Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views
and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or
the Department of the Navy.

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18 May 1998

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14 May 98
Date

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

1. Report Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED			
2. Security Classification Authority:			
3. Declassification/Downgrading Schedule:			
4. Distribution/Availability of Report: DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A: APPROVED FOR PUBLIC RELEASE; DISTRIBUTION IS UNLIMITED.			
5. Name of Performing Organization: JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT			
6. Office Symbol: C	7. Address: NAVAL WAR COLLEGE 686 CUSHING ROAD NEWPORT, RI 02841-1207		
8. Title (Include Security Classification): The Operational Leadership of General H. Norman Schwarzkopf During Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm (U)			
9. Personal Authors: LCDR Michael L. Martin, USN			
10. Type of Report: FINAL	11. Date of Report: 18 May 1998		
12. Page Count: 23			
13. Supplementary Notation: A paper submitted to the Faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the JMO Department. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.			
14. Ten key words that relate to your paper: Operational Leadership, Communications, Trust, Conflict Resolution, Foresight, Risk Taking, Experience			
15. Abstract: Most of the biographies of General Schwarzkopf, including his autobiography, typically portray him as a military genius and a hero. Indeed, the overwhelming success of Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm certainly substantiates the claim that he was one of the most successful operational commanders in our history. He also had his share of faults as an operational leader. This paper takes a close look at some of his successes and failures during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. The intent is to provide a critical analysis of General Schwarzkopf's operational leadership that will be of value to future operational commanders.			
16. Distribution / Availability of Abstract: Abstract: X	Unclassified	Same As Rpt	DTIC Users
17. Abstract Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED			
18. Name of Responsible Individual: CHAIRMAN, JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT			
19. Telephone: 841-6461	20. Office Symbol: C		

ABSTRACT

Most of the biographies of General Schwarzkopf, including his autobiography, typically portray him as a military genius and a hero. Indeed, the overwhelming success of Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm certainly substantiates the claim that he was one of the most successful operational commanders in our history. He also had his share of faults as an operational leader. This paper takes a close look at some of his successes and failures during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. The intent is to provide a critical analysis of General Schwarzkopf's operational leadership that will be of value to future operational commanders.

INTRODUCTION

This paper takes a close look at the successes and failures of the operational leadership of General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, U.S. Army, during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. The intent is to provide a critical analysis that will be of value to future operational leaders.

Operational commanders may see the world through the eyes of their previous experience, service culture, parochialism and upbringing. They must be careful to recognize this tendency that might lead to an unintentional narrow focus about how to conduct military operations.

General Schwarzkopf was an Army infantry officer by trade. Prior to Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, he had a great deal of operational military experience having served two tours in Vietnam, commanded a Division and a Corps and served as the Deputy Commander during the rescue operation in Grenada. His background as a military professional and his familiarity with the region, having lived in Iran as a dependent, made him ideally suited to be the Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Central Command.

General Schwarzkopf's views were shaped by some of the negative experiences he had in the Army from the start.

Upon graduating from West Point, he was dismayed by the quality of leaders he saw in the Army's officer corps. In Vietnam, he was disillusioned by how poorly the leaders conducted themselves. His lack of respect for these officers led him to consider resigning on more than one occasion. Ultimately however, he chose to stay in the Army because he felt that otherwise he would be quitting. He hoped to effect changes on his own someday.¹

It is clear that General Schwarzkopf took away several lessons from his experience of the Vietnam War. For instance, he refused to allow centralized control from the White House. Fortunately, he had a President like George Bush who felt the same way. B-52's also had made a big impression upon him. His plan for the Gulf War was to have B-52's take out the Republican Guard. The Air Force planners tried in vain to point out that when dropping "dumb" bombs from medium to high altitude, there would be no way of telling exactly where they would land. No amount of briefing or objections could sway him.²

The lies that were told concerning body count during the Vietnam War had a big influence upon General Schwarzkopf and, as a result, he refused to track it as a statistic

during the Gulf War.³ Additionally, he felt that U.S. forces had too often gone into harm's way ill prepared during the Vietnam War and this viewpoint was reinforced by a tragic minefield incident he experienced with his own troops. This event helped to shape his preoccupation with avoiding loss of life during the Gulf War.⁴ He would make sure that everything was absolutely ready to go before he committed his forces.⁵

In his heart, General Schwarzkopf was first and foremost a ground soldier. Following the rescue operation in Grenada, his true colors showed in his comments: "Grenada, once again, proved that even though higher headquarters screws it up every way you can possibly screw it up, it is the initiative and valor on the part of the small units, the small unit of leadership, and the soldiers on the ground that will win it for you every time."⁶

COMMUNICATION AND TRUST

Operational commanders should trust their subordinate commanders and foster an environment where they are expected to take initiative.⁷ Communications in this regard must be clear and unambiguous.

General Schwarzkopf clearly trusted his subordinate commanders and their ability to develop plans during the Gulf War. The problem was that oftentimes, for the planners and the subordinate commanders, the roles were unclear. The Marines for instance had planned to break through the Iraqi defenses and race to Kuwait. When they found out that the planners had relegated them to a supporting force role to the Army main effort, they were furious. Although General Schwarzkopf backed them up by telling his planners that the Marines were free to come up with their own plan, he allowed his planning cell to prepare for a ground offensive for two months without the Marines' knowledge.⁸ In this regard, he failed to communicate properly to his planning staff and should have had Marines involved from the start.

Another flaw in General Schwarzkopf's communications was the fact that he brought in a team of planners for both the air offensive and ground offensive that were from outside his staff. These planners worked up ideas on their own and thus a considerable amount of planning occurred without the knowledge of other service component commanders. For example, Air Force planners worked up an offensive designed to defeat the Iraqis through the use of air power alone.

This was never General Schwarzkopf's intention and when they briefed him on their concept, he threatened to fire the Generals who ran the air war. "The air campaign, he exploded, was going to go exactly the way he wanted it."⁹ Had General Schwarzkopf been clearer on his intentions to the Air Force, he may not have found himself in this situation, although the Air Force obviously had their own agenda and were going to try to push it.

The Navy and Marine Corps experienced communications problems as well. General Schwarzkopf had confided in members of his staff that he had no intention of conducting an amphibious landing, which he felt would result in too many casualties. He did not want to tell the Marines and Navy how to do their business however, and as a result, they were still planning for an amphibious landing in February. In fact, when the Navy wanted to sink mine laying ships that were making a future amphibious landing that much more dangerous, he refused because he did not want "to provoke the Iraqi's for an operation of dubious importance while the Army's reinforcements were still en route to the Gulf."¹⁰ Thus, once again, General Schwarzkopf allowed the forces to conduct their own planning but failed to communicate his

intention to them. Interestingly though, it can be argued that it was a brilliant decision because it spared the lives of the Marines while it tied up the Iraqis who were worried about Marines landing on the beaches of Kuwait.

The Army also had its share of communications difficulties. Although they were allowed to conduct their own planning, General Schwarzkopf kept control of the ground forces even while he was the CINC. This was obviously a role he was comfortable with due to his background, but it had a lot to do with a lack of faith in two of his Army commanders, LT GEN John Yeosock, U.S. Army, Commander of the Third Army and LT GEN Fred Franks, U.S. Army, Commander of the Army's VII Corps. General Schwarzkopf's frustration with the slow progress of LT GEN Franks' VII Corps is yet another example of poor communications. As Professor Milan Vego of the U.S. Naval War College points out, subordinate commanders should act in consonance with the intent of the higher commander.¹¹ LT GEN Franks was moving his forces as he had planned and had no other guidance to the contrary. When the two Generals ended up on the phone, LT GEN Franks points out in his book, "it was our only talk during those four days (of the ground war) and afterward, I could not

help but conclude that he was satisfied with what we were doing."¹²

One has to wonder who was really at fault here. General Schwarzkopf was considering relieving LT GEN Franks, but Franks was just doing what he thought he was supposed to be doing.¹³ Exploding in front of your staff concerning the conduct of one of your subordinate commanders is hardly an effective way to get your message across. It is unfortunate for LT GEN Franks that someone on the staff did not clearly communicate General Schwarzkopf's frustration. On the other hand, it can be argued that General Schwarzkopf actually did the right thing. As Vego points out, "Operational commanders should interfere with the decision of their subordinate commanders only when those decisions are unsound and could jeopardize the outcome of the entire operation. The operational commander should provide only broad direction for action, leaving the detailed tactical employment of forces to subordinate commanders."¹⁴ In his autobiography, General Schwarzkopf states that he had to tell LT GEN Franks to get moving. It appears that he held off from interfering until it became critical. It is certainly the commander's prerogative to jump in when he

deems it necessary. The fact that he had not jumped in beforehand is testament to his abiding by this principle. It can also be argued, though, the fact that he had to interfere in the first place means he had not communicated his intent clearly enough.

"The operational commander uses command and control to integrate all other joint force functions such as maneuver, firepower and intelligence to ensure unity of effort in accomplishing a mission."¹⁵ In this regard, the Army wound up with a problem during the ground offensive because the Marines were too successful following the initiation of their ground offensive. General Schwarzkopf had planned on the Marines moving much slower. This forced the Army into having to accelerate its time table. The Marines did not know that they should have gone slower and the Army had not considered the option of having to go sooner.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

"Operational commanders should spend as much time as possible with their staffs and subordinate commanders during professional development, war games and exercises to discuss various military problems."¹⁶ This concept highlights what could be one of the problems with the Commander of the

Central Command not actually owning forces. He did not have control of them until they were assigned. As a result, they were not accustomed to working together and General Schwarzkopf did not get the opportunity to train them in the way he wanted things accomplished.

"Creative leaders deliberately create conflict - not to increase competition necessarily but to create sparks that contain ideas."¹⁷ During Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, there were a lot of interservice tensions due in part to General Schwarzkopf preferring to let his commanders work out their differences on their own.¹⁸ In some instances this may have been an effective way of handling disputes, but overall it was detrimental to cooperation among the services. One of the primary sources of friction was the Air Force plan to defeat the Iraqis through the use of air power alone. The Army and Marines had a list of targets they wanted taken out prior to the start of the ground offensive which the Air Force was essentially ignoring, preferring instead to strike targets in Baghdad and central Iraq. The Navy was frustrated as well because they felt that they had a subordinate role in the air campaign, and when they identified targets, they had

a difficult time getting them on the target list. The Army had the same problem: "of the 1185 targets that the Army nominated by the end of January, 202 (17 percent) had been included in the Air Tasking Order and only 137 (12 percent) had actually been attacked."¹⁹ These unresolved tensions undermined cooperation to the point that the Marines eventually told the air war planners that their "aircraft were no longer available for carrying out strikes in central Iraq."²⁰

General Schwarzkopf appears to have been too "hands off" in dealing with the tensions between his subordinate commanders. When these problems were brought to his attention, rather than step up and resolve them himself, he appointed his Deputy Commander to adjudicate.²¹ It can be argued that for all his military genius, he was too focused as a ground commander when he should have been reigning in his component commanders. He relied too heavily upon the ability of each service to plan its own operation when he should have been the one making the big picture decisions such as telling the Air Force to quit the air strikes in Baghdad and get on with the battlefield strikes that were needed. It could also be said that he did not have, as

Milan Vego puts it, "a thorough understanding of operational art and strategy which consists of mastering the employment of large military forces to accomplish operational goals in the theater."²² He had a handle on what he wanted to do with the ground forces but did not necessarily know exactly how to employ the Air Force.

As previously discussed, throughout the planning for the Gulf War, it appears that General Schwarzkopf was preoccupied with the ground offensive. In fact he may have been focused upon the ground war at the expense of everything else. Air Force planners believed that the destruction of the two divisions at Khafji before the ground offensive started was proof of what air power could do to the rest of the Iraqi Army. Indeed, it has been argued that General Schwarzkopf "failed to see Khafji as a defining moment" and he was "not inclined to accept the idea that the Iraqi Army could be destroyed from the air and did not make a single substantive change in the plan for a land offensive."²³ Another example of this fixation on the ground war was the fact that "the ground-war date was determined more by Army and Marine logistics than by a sense

that the air war had exhausted its potential."²⁴ The bottom line was the Army was going to have its day.

FORESIGHT AND RISK TAKING

Operational Commanders need to be forward thinking, be willing to take risks and have the ability to evaluate the current operational military situation. "They must keep an eye on any world situation that might affect the strategic situation within their area of responsibility."²⁵ General Schwarzkopf was forward thinking about his area of responsibility because prior to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Central Command had conducted a war game to study exactly what would happen if Iraq invaded. The war game conducted was perfectly applicable to the real situation in Saudi Arabia.²⁶

With respect to risk taking, General Schwarzkopf had to make many judgments during the Gulf War. Although he appeared risk averse because of his preoccupation with avoiding loss of life, an example of his willingness to take risks was the taking of the Safwan road junction. General Schwarzkopf was under the misguided impression that the VII Corps had taken the Safwan road junction and as a result, he chose that site for the cease-fire talks. After it was

approved by General Powell and the White House, General Schwarzkopf ordered LT GEN Yeosock to get preparations started. He soon found out that Safwan not only had not been taken but was still occupied by Iraqi forces. In order to save face, he ordered VII Corps to take Safwan with a show of force. "Capture him if he refuses to withdraw. If he attacks you, then return fire."²⁷ Fortunately for General Schwarzkopf, the Iraqis departed. Obviously a risky gamble, it could have turned out to be a bad risk had the VII Corps gotten into a fight during the cease-fire and suffered casualties solely in order for him to save face. In this instance, he almost violated the rule that the commander "should possess a certain boldness but avoid recklessness."²⁸

EXPERIENCE

For the future operational leader, there is no substitute for previous joint military experience conducting actual operations. One need only look at the background of those military professionals making it to the level of theater commander today to see that joint operational experience counts. Many of today's leaders took part in operations in Haiti, Somalia, and Bosnia. As was pointed

out previously, General Schwarzkopf was the Deputy Commander during the rescue operation in Grenada and learned a great deal from this experience. A Major General at the time, it was his idea to fly Army Rangers aboard Marine helicopters in order to rescue the students. The operation was a huge success but he had to threaten to court martial the Colonel who was in charge of the Marines to get him to agree.²⁹ Getting thrown into this situation on short notice and working with joint military forces was a perfect training opportunity for him. Not all of our operational commanders get this kind of experience and it is likely that it played well in the decision to make him a CINC. It also had a lot to do with the way he conducted himself in the Gulf War.

RECOMMENDATIONS

What can a future operational leader take away from the previous discussion? (1) First and foremost, the operational commander must never forget that he is in charge. Nobody doubted that General Schwarzkopf was in charge, but he did not make full use of his authority, particularly in settling disputes between his subordinate commanders. Subordinate commanders are powerful military officers and there will likely be a lot of service pressure

and politics that will be brought to bear on unpopular decisions, but that is why there is an operational commander. He has to make the tough calls. He must be the one who sits down with his subordinate commanders and tells them how it is going to be.

(2) Communication is the key. Those subordinate commanders may not like what they hear but they need to hear it so they do not waste their time in useless planning. Military officers at that level have spent the better part of some twenty-five to thirty years being flexible and following the orders of their superiors. Regardless of how senior they are, they will follow the guidance and intent set forth by the operational commander so long as they are privy to it. Leaving disputes to be settled among subordinate commanders is not always the best way to conduct business at that level.

(3) Another thing that future operational leaders can take away from an analysis of General Schwarzkopf's experience is to beware of their own parochial attitude. Regardless how open minded a leader intends to be, the fact is that education, training, and service doctrine very much influences the way he knows how to conduct military

operations. Having a healthy respect for this tendency will help future operational commanders to avoid a narrow focus on how to approach a situation.

CONCLUSION

This paper has taken a critical look at General Schwarzkopf as an operational leader. Considering the results of Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, he was certainly very successful. With the fog and friction of war, no operation of this magnitude could possibly be executed flawlessly. The points addressed are provided for the benefit of analysis by future operational commanders.

NOTES

1. Roger Cohen and Claudio Gaiti, In The Eye of the Storm (New York: Straus and Giroux, 1991), 119.
2. Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, The Generals' War (Canada: Little, Brown and Co., 1995), 201.
3. Cohen and Gaiti, 119.
4. *Ibid.*, 258.
5. *Ibid.*, 279.
6. Jack Anderson and Dale Van Atta, Stormin' Norman: An American Hero (New York: Kensington, 1991), 68.
7. John T. Nelsen, "Where to Go from Here?: Considerations for the Formal Adoption of Auftragstaktik by the US Army" Unpublished Research Paper, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1986, 19.
8. Gordon and Trainor, 160-1.
9. *Ibid.*, 200.
10. *Ibid.*, 292.
11. Milan Vego, On Operational Art (Newport, R.I.: United States Naval War College, 1998), 258.
12. Tom Clancy with Gen. Fred Franks, Jr. (Ret), Into The Storm (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1997), 368.
13. Gordon and Trainor, 397.
14. Vego, 258,60.
15. *Ibid.*, 256.
16. *Ibid.*, 255.

17. Robert L. Taylor and William E Rosenbach, ed., Military Leadership: In Pursuit of Excellence (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1984), 232.
18. Gordon and Trainor, 320.
- 19 Ibid., 319-20.
20. Ibid., 320.
21. Ibid.
22. Vego, 254-5.
23. Gordon and Trainor, 288.
24. Ibid., 307.
25. Vego, 259.
26. Cohen and Gaiti, 185.
27. Gordon and Trainor, 441.
28. Vego, 254.
29. General H. Norman Schwarzkopf with Peter Petre, The Autobiography: It Doesn't Take a Hero (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), 254.

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